Marketing Mag
Apr, 2001

@JIM CARROLL

Why marketers should focus on great digital creative

BY JIM CARROLL

People decided that because the Net lets them track data, it should be done. But no one stopped to ask if this is where the industry really wants to go

As an accountant, I believe I am qualified to say this to many of you marketing types: ***Would you please stop acting like accountants and get back to acting like marketing folks?***

Now that I have your attention, permit me to get this off my chest.

For a long time, I have marvelled at the intrusion into the marketing world's creative pureness of a bunch of number-crunching numbskulls. What has me on this latest rant is a recent article in the *Financial Post* titled "Online banners still have legs" by Will Novosedlik. The subtitle says it all: "Better ad-tracking devices designed to soothe clients." Novosedlik goes on to explain efforts that will allow for reporting on "a wide range of dimensions, including brand awareness, brand perception and audience targeting." It's a good article that outlines some of the mathematical tools that can measure the effectiveness of online ad technologies.

But an article like this makes it seem like lots of people in an industry possessed of remarkable creative talents are now rushing off to become Net accountants. Being a Chartered Accountant myself–although I am no longer involved in the practice of this bizarre art–I am stunned that so many creative types seem to be going down this road.

The question is: Are you nuts? Whatever happened to creativity as the key element to marketing success?

Years ago, when the Internet was first emerging, Peter Munck, now group creative director at MacLaren McCann Interactive in Toronto, invited me to speak to a group of his clients about the impact of the Net. After I finished, Munck presented me with a coffee-table book that extolled the creative genius of advertising artist Bill Bernbach. I was enthralled and still am. I often look at this book and marvel at the brilliance of his work. It helped me to understand what people mean by "creative."

And yet, the digital marketing industry seems eager to leave behind the legacy of folks like Bernbach. Everyone seems to be rushing about, getting involved with a world that is too scientific, too focused on numbers and too involved with technology that lets marketing types act like accountants.

Drop it. Get away from it. Refuse to participate in it. Get back to creative. Dream up a great campaign and figure out how to make technology such as the Web play a role. But don't get caught up in the numbers. Great digital campaigns–great ideas–stand on their own.

From my perspective, things began to go wrong in the early days of the Internet when Procter & Gamble, long one of the most dominant and far-reaching forces in the marketing world, decided that it would only pay for advertisements on Web sites if people happened to click on them.

Wham! An entire industry of number crunchers emerged, intent on measuring hits and page views and who knows what else. And from there was born the insanity of an industry that for awhile tried to base the value of corporate entities on the concept of "eyeballs." And people were so busy with the science, they lost sight of reality.

It just doesn't make sense to me. Think about it: The other day, I was driving down the highway and glanced at a great billboard. I read a magazine and, out of the corner of my eye, a neat ad caught my attention. I watched TV and saw a humorous spot.

I'm not part of an ACNeilsen family. Where is the technology tracking my eyeball, recording what I do as a "hit" while I'm driving or reading or watching? There isn't any, other than broad tools that give broad guidance.

So why the heck do you have to be so bloody precise with the Internet? I think people decided that because the Net lets them track data, it should be done. But no one stopped to ask if this is where the industry really wants to go. And so marketers are busy tracking Web hits and banner ad clickthroughs.

Danger resides in this inane focus on measurement. It leads the digital marketing industry down the path to remuneration based on measurement. Clients will pay if creatives do something that gets great hit rates. The science becomes more important than the concept.

I think that would be very sad, because math has a tendency to kill creative. If this trend continues, the opportunities in the digital marketing industry will be for the number nuts, not for the geniuses who can dream up fascinating stuff.

The fact is, those who have been truly successful marketers are those who have done great creative. So spend your time planning a great campaign, and figure out how to work the Web into it. Dream up a wonderful way to hook me with something online. Continue to explore all the great new online marketing ideas and technologies.

But do it creatively, not scientifically. Because if you do great creative, you won't need to measure it, because you will achieve a buzz. To take a phrase from Bernbach, "Nobody counts the number of ads you run; they just remember the impression you make."

Accountants should be accountants, and creative marketing types should be creative marketing types, and confusing the two just doesn't add up to buzz-generating digital marketing.

JIM CARROLL is the Mississauga, Ont.-based author of more than 29 books related to the Internet and e-commerce.